Club 45: No Easy Decisions
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Introduction: Club 45

My paper is titled “Club 45” in keeping with the Kit Kat Club tradition of mysterious titles. Tonight I will talk about one of the world's most exclusive clubs, a club that has had only 43 members in its 223-year history.

Its first member joined on April 30, 1789 in New York City. Its most recent member was sworn in on January 20, 2009 in Washington DC. Eight of its members had Ohio connections.

That club, of course, is the U.S. Presidency. Given that the November 6 election is only three weeks away, I thought club members might appreciate a more reflective discussion of this important office and a respite from negative political ads. Surely, we can debate national issues with a mutual respect that allows us-as Americans- to work together after the election.

Tonight, I will examine four perspectives on US presidents:

1) Discovering the surprising bond between incumbents and former presidents

2) Reading about presidents and visiting presidential sites

3) Rating the best and worst presidents

4) Learning from our nation's presidents

1. Discovering the surprising bond between incumbents and former presidents

Barack Obama is the 44th US President, a calculation that includes Grover Cleveland as both the 22nd and 24th presidents. We're told that Theodore Roosevelt disagreed with these designations which are admittedly confusing. In fact, some of you may remember that President Obama's inaugural address included an inaccurate reference to “44 Americans have now taken the presidential oath."

I have no wisdom about the outcome of the November 6, 2012 election, but at some point in the future there will be a 45th president and he or she will become a member of one of the world's most exclusive clubs.

The title Club 45 was inspired by “The Presidents Club: Inside the Worlds' Most Exclusive Fraternity,” a recent book by Time Magazine editors Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy. Gibbs and Duffy (who is from Columbus) were among the journalists and historians who lectured at a week-long seminar on the U.S. Presidency at the Chautauqua Institute this summer. It was so encouraging to be part of an audience of 4,000 people attentively listening to daily lectures on our nation's leaders.

Gibbs and Duffy's book describes the unusual friendships that have developed among incumbent and former presidents; a bond forged by having shared the profound responsibilities of the presidency. A common bond that transcends partisanship in many cases.

The President's Club profiles the unusual relationship that developed between Democratic President Harry Truman and former President Herbert Hoover who was a Republican. Hoover was the only living former president when Truman took office in 1945 and Democrats had been accusing Hoover of failing to prevent the Great Depression since 1929.
Yet, when Truman took office after the death of Franklin Roosevelt, he invited a startled Herbert Hoover to visit him in the White House.

Truman sought Hoover's help in speeding up food aid to a largely destroyed Europe and hoped he could repeat his success in feeding Belgium after World War I.

In response, Hoover flew to Europe and spent three weeks observing food aid programs and devising ways to make them more effective. At age 72 he worked long winter days in unheated army bases shrouded in blankets. Hoover recommended setting up soup kitchens using existing military supply lines. In Germany alone, these canteens helped feed three-and-a-half million school children as schools reopened.

Hoover and Truman also worked together with Secretary of State George Marshall to devise the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe including Germany. This plan helped revive both the American and European economies.

On the domestic front, Truman sought Hoover's help in persuading Congress to permit the restructuring of the executive branch, an initiative sought by six previous presidents in both parties over 35 years. During World War II the federal government had expanded greatly. Under wartime pressures, agencies were sometimes added to address immediate issues without an overall plan.

The bipartisan Hoover Commission, as it became known, made 27 specific recommendations to streamline federal programs. Congress adopted nearly all of the Commission's recommendations to reduce 65 agencies by two-thirds.

Another former Republican president, Richard Nixon, as part of his reputation reclamation project, reached out to Democrat Bill Clinton with a letter advising him about relations with Russia. This unlikely pair then began exchanging late night phone calls. Nixon reported that no other president-including Eisenhower whose vice-president he was for eight years-had confided in him as deeply. Nixon reciprocated with off the record stories about former presidents: Eisenhower and Kennedy could tolerate shaking hands but recoiled

when someone such as Lyndon Johnson would try to throw his arms around them.

Currently, there are four living former presidents. Jimmy Carter and George Herbert Walker Bush are both 88-years-old and Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are both age 66. If Barack Obama leaves office in 2013 he will be 51-years old (a mere child to Kit Kat members). If he serves another full four-year term, he will be age 55 when he leaves office.

Incumbent presidents can call upon any living former president. For example, President Obama asked former presidents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush to assist with the rebuilding of New Orleans. He also invited former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton to join together in assisting Haiti after the terrible earthquake there. In fact, Bill Clinton and the Bush family have become so close that Jeb Bush calls Clinton "our brother from another mother."

2. Reading about Presidents and Visiting Presidential Sites

I am an amateur history buff who enjoys reading about U.S. presidents. The best presidential biographies provide me with a window into important historical periods such as the Revolutionary War, the battle against slavery and the Civil War and the World War to defeat Adolph Hitler. Biographies teach me about these issues and how various presidents faced these challenges.

Over the years I've collected historical used books and autographed biographies. We have a library in our home housing 350 or so books about every president. My goal was to read a book about every president, a goal I've met, although there is much I have yet to learn.

We are fortunate to live in an age rich with presidential biographers. Newly available papers are enabling fresh perspectives.

Who would have thought there could be something fresh to say about George Washington? Yet, scholars at the University of Virginia have been working since 1968 to assemble all of Washington's papers and letters in one place. The 60 volumes published so far contain new eyewitness accounts which in turn provide fresh material for critically reviewed new books such as Ron Chernow's biography of George Washington.

Historian Douglas Brinkley's recent book “Wilderness Warriors: Teddy Roosevelt and the Crusade for America” describes Roosevelt's conservation efforts and the battle to establish National Parks. The release of the letters and papers of Gifford Pinchot, the first director of the U.S. Forest Service provided a fresh perspective and new information for historians.

I know some of you share my appreciation for recent presidential biographies including:

- Robert Caro's controversial four-volumes on Lyndon Baines Johnson. His latest volume is also his most balanced.

- Doris Kearns Goodwin's “Team of Rivals” about Abraham Lincoln and his cabinet. In a counter-intuitive move, Lincoln appointed his rivals to key posts.

  Goodwin's “No Ordinary Times,” a dual biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt during World War Two, provides insights into two complex and accomplished historical figures.

  I'm looking forward to her next book on the uneasy relationship between Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

- David McCullough's biographies of John Adams and Harry Truman have helped many of us appreciate their contributions.

- Edmund Morris' three volumes about Theodore Roosevelt have deservedly been praised for their thoroughness.

- In addition, historian Arthur Schlesinger commissioned a 43-volume series of brief presidential biographies aimed at busy readers. Some are penned by unexpected authors such as Watergate lawyer John Dean who wrote a contrarian biography of his fellow Marion, Ohio native Warren G Harding.

On the other hand, some presidential autobiographies-such as those written by Bill Clinton and George W. Bush-have contributed little to our understanding of the challenges they face and thus have earned a reputation as bland and self-serving.

However, many historians consider “The Memoirs of U.S. Grant,” our 18th president, to be the finest autobiography by a president. The memoirs were written at the end of Grant's life as he was battling lung cancer and facing bankruptcy from an investment gone awry.

Grant's writings are not about his two-terms in office, which historians are still debating. But, it's worth noting that Grant was the only president to serve two consecutive full terms between Andrew Jackson in 1837 and Woodrow Wilson in 1913.
Note: Andrew Jackson served as our 7th president from 1829 to 1837 and Woodrow Wilson served as our 28th from 1913 to 1921.Grant was in office from 1869 to 1877.

Instead, Grant wrote about his experiences in the American Civil War in clear prose. “The Memoirs of U.S. Grant” were printed and marketed by Mark Twain and became a best-seller in 1885, months after Grant's death. In early 1886, Mark Twain presented Grant's near penniless widow Julia with a royalty check for $200,000, the first of several remittances.

Keep in mind that presidents only earned modest salaries and had no pensions or White House expense accounts until the late 1940's. That's when former President Hoover persuaded Congress to enact a law aimed at helping President Harry Truman who said his take-home pay was only $80 a week.

To complement books we've collected about presidents, we purchased photos from the Columbus Dispatch archives of presidents visiting Columbus, a special occasion until the past few elections. We framed photos of 12 presidents-6 Republicans and 6 Democrats - in our library. One photo shows Richard Nixon and Woody Hayes raising clasped hands in front of the State House. Another photo captures Lyndon Johnson wincing as then City Councilman Maury Portman gave his injured fingers a crushing handshake at Port Columbus Airport. A photo from 1919 shows Woodrow Wilson being greeted by Ohio State University President William Oxley Thompson at Union Station as he began a series of lectures on the League of Nations.

These photos are a visual reminder of how our city's history is intertwined with that of the nation.

In addition to reading a book about every president, I've visited the homes and libraries of many presidents. Some were simple gravesites while others were vast estates. Some are staffed by the National Park Service as National Historic Sites, while others are maintained by local historical societies. A few, such as the grave of John Tyler, the president who supported the Confederacy during the Civil War, are only marked by small discreet signs.

I began visiting presidential sites as a boy with my parents who enjoyed learning about American history. After serving as an Army pilot, my father used the GI Bill to become the first college graduate in his family. My mother was a librarian and the daughter of a small town newspaper owner interested in current events. My parents took my brothers and me to Washington DC to tour historical sites.

Even today when I visit Washington DC a few times every year, I think of my father whispering Lincoln's Gettysburg Address to us in the cathedral-like Lincoln Memorial. I remember how much he enjoyed traveling by boat to George Washington's home at Mount Vernon.

Continuing this family tradition, my daughter Megan and I visited all of the Ohio presidential sites while she was growing up. If you haven't done this, I recommend standing on Warren G. Harding's porch imagining the 600,000 supporters who made the pilgrimage there in 1920 to hear him speak without a microphone. Or visiting President Garfield's home near Mentor to understand more about the first college president (Hiram College) and ordained minister to be elected president.

Megan-who by then had majored in history at Ohio State-and I visited Lyndon Johnson's presidential library in Austin, Texas as well as his ranch in the Hill Country. There are many stories associated with this colorful wheeler dealer president.

In July 1965, Johnson was getting ready to sign the Medicare Act and invited former president Harry Truman to join him. Truman had supported a similar, albeit unsuccessful, effort as World War II ended.

Truman wasn't feeling so well and said he was unable to travel to Washington DC. In response, on short notice, Johnson moved the bill signing to the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri.

When Johnson arrived, he noted that Truman looked frail. Johnson then proceeded to tell Truman that he would assign an Army medical corpsman to take care of Truman and his wife Bess, just as these corpsman had done when Truman was in the White House. Johnson arranged for the corpsman and Truman was appreciative.

Four years later in 1969, Johnson had retired to his ranch after deciding not to run for another term. TV newsman Dan Rather was interviewing Johnson and noticed an army medical corpsman

hovering in the background. He asked Johnson if he had any health problems and Johnson said no. "Well then, why do you need a corpsman standing by?" inquired Rather. "It comes with the job" countered Johnson. "After all, Harry Truman has one."

Among the most obscure sites we visited was the grave of Zachary Taylor in a military cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky. Taylor, who served a brief term of 16 months, died in office. Some claimed he was poisoned. In response, his remains were exhumed and tested for poisoning in recent years. No toxins were found.

In Ronald Reagan's childhood home in Dixon, Illinois there is a photo of the amiable president visiting the site of his nearby childhood school and whispering a mock confidence to the crowd. "Among my first acts as president was to classify my junior high grades."

Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover were the first presidents to plan a library for their documents. Roosevelt's library is located on the grounds of his childhood home in Hyde Park, New York overlooking the Hudson River. The library includes a typical 1930's living room with a family listening to his fireside chats and a life-size replica of the War Room at the White House complete with elaborate maps.

Ironically, the library site contains a small restaurant named "Mrs. Nesbitt's Cupboard" after the Roosevelt's White House cook. Every Roosevelt biography mentions how much FDR despised her cooking and often complained to friends about her plain fare.

Today, there are 13 presidential libraries, one for every president since Hoover who was the 31st president. These presidential libraries are overseen by the Office of Presidential Libraries in the National Archives and Records Administration. Some began as uncritical shrines but most now provide more historical context and acknowledge differing points of view.

One historian who has played a leadership role in helping presidential libraries to become more historically accurate is Richard Norton Smith. Smith has been the director of presidential libraries for Herbert Hoover, Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. He has also served as a senior consultant for the new George W. Bush library which is slated to open in April 2013 on the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas. And, he advised the new Abraham Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Illinois. Norton is also the author of well-regarded books about George Washington and Herbert Hoover.

At the Gerald Ford Presidential Library in Grand Rapids, Michigan we learned about the night President and Mrs. Ford were entertaining Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip at the White House. The US Air Force Orchestra was playing as President Ford asked Queen Elizabeth to dance. Ford was swelling with pride until he realized that the orchestra was playing "And the Lady is a Tramp," a song made popular by Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra.

Outside Charlotte, North Carolina, two high school history teachers from the former East Germany and I followed a youthful guide as she showed us the recreated birthplace of James Polk. The German teachers were surprised that there were so few visitors at an historical site honoring a president who had expanded the geographical boundaries of the U.S. more than any president except Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase.

In 2011, my wife Sue tallied up these visits and we realized I had visited a site for all but three presidents. So, that summer we visited Grover Cleveland's childhood home in Caldwell, New Jersey not far from Princeton. There, our tour guide wore a floor length black burka, a sharp contrast to the period costumes worn by staff at many presidential sites. She told us she was a native-born American who had converted to Islam and loved U.S. history.

We found Chester Arthur's gravesite marked by a small sign in an Albany, New York cemetery still in use. Arthur was born in northern Vermont, close to the Canadian border, which was not as well-

marked as it is today. His opponents argued that he was ineligible to be president since he wasn't born in the U.S. At the time, few newborns had birth certificates. A judge was presented with the Arthur family bible and was persuaded by the hand written entry chronicling the date and place of Arthur's birth.

Millard Fillmore had a small honeymoon cottage built outside Buffalo as a wedding gift to his bride. A school teacher/guide in period clothes led us on a tour of the small home. She had written a biography of Fillmore for children. We bought a copy and asked her to autograph it which surprised and pleased her. "Not that many people are interested in Millard Fillmore," she commented.

Our visit to Fillmore's home completed my goal of visiting a site for every president. In the course of meeting that goal, I toured 66 homes, libraries, museums and gravesites in 20 states and the District of Columbia. Sue said she was going to celebrate with a good glass of wine at the nearby Roycroft Inn.

3. Rating the Best and Worst U.S. Presidents

Robert Merry's new book "Where They Stand: The American Presidents in the Eyes of Voters and Historians" summarizes the results of seven surveys of historians from 1948 to 2005. Three of these polls were commissioned by Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Jr., one was commissioned by the Chicago Tribune and the most recent was conducted by the Wall Street Journal in 2005.

Merry concludes that two-term presidents generally have the greatest lasting impact. In the past century that would include only Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Put another way, of the 19 presidents who served between William McKinley, our 25th president in 1900 and Barack Obama our 44th president in 2012, only six were elected to and served two full terms.

There was a consensus among these historians that the five best presidents were:

- Abraham Lincoln, named number one in all but one poll
- George Washington and Franklin Roosevelt, named in the top three in every poll
- Thomas Jefferson, voted in the top five in every poll
- Theodore Roosevelt, named in the top seven in every poll

To give Kit Kat members the opportunity to weigh in, Our Club Secretary Artie Isaac, invited all 64 Kit Kat members-active, associates and out-of-towners -to name the five best and five worst presidents. 31 responded. Kit Kat members largely agreed that Lincoln, Washington, FDR, and Jefferson were the four best. But, Kit Kat members selected Harry Truman and Ronald Reagan who tied for 5th best ahead of Theodore Roosevelt.

The historians agreed about four of the five worst presidents: Warren Harding, James Buchanan, Franklin Pierce and Andrew Johnson. Richard Nixon and Ulysses Grant, who tied for fifth worse, have earned slightly higher ratings in recent years but are still solidly members of the ten worst.

Our members agreed with the historians that Warren Harding was the worst and Andrew Johnson was the fifth worst. But our members selected George W. Bush as the second worst followed by Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter.

Thank you to those who participated in this completely unscientific but enjoyable exercise.

What do these results mean? These results underscore Treasurer George Meiling's observation that the politics of club members range from monarchists to communists.

4. Closing: Learning from our Nation's Former Presidents

"No Easy Decisions" is the subtitle for this essay. All easy decisions are made at the agency or cabinet officer level. By the time an issue works its way to the president, a raft of agency staff have analyzed it and cabinet members have reviewed it and made recommendations. Respecting this fact, we can learn a great deal from the study of former presidents. We can:

- Embrace the example of former presidents such as John Kennedy who reached out to Dwight Eisenhower for advice during the Cuban missile crisis. If you are interested in listening to the actual phone calls between Kennedy and Eisenhower, go to the Miller Center for the Study of the U.S. Presidency website at the University of Virginia http://millercenter.org/president. The Center's rich resources include audio tapes from every president from FDR forward.

- Reflect on the fact that presidential decisions are sometimes better understood over time.

Some examples would include:

- Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase (it was said by some that he stretched the Constitution until it cracked to justify this commitment).

- Gerald Ford's pardon of Nixon, unpopular at the time, but most historians agree was a prudent step in helping the country recover from Watergate.

- Andrew Johnson's support for Secretary of State Seward's Folly in purchasing Alaska in 1867.

- George W Bush's little-known initiative to improve food security and AIDS prevention and treatment in Africa...which I was able to observe in February in Rwanda and Uganda.

There will always be spirited debate in America. It is a vital part of our national identity. But in the final three weeks before the election and in the months afterwards we need to debate issues of national interest in a framework of mutual respect.

In that spirit, I would like to conclude this paper with the closing paragraph of one of our nation's most important presidential addresses. Namely, Lincoln's second inaugural address on March 4, 1865. (Note: Lee surrendered on April 9 and Lincoln was assassinated on April 14, 1865)

Lincoln spoke to a crowd of 25,000, including many soldiers, some of whom were missing limbs.

Lincoln spoke outdoors amid Washington's muddy, unpaved streets. Sharpshooters on rooftops and undercover agents in the crowd attempted to protect the President.

Some whites in the crowd closest to Lincoln were angry about the loss of northern lives in the bloody civil war and wanted to hear what actions would be taken against the South.

A large number of African-Americans, including Frederick Douglas, stood on the edge of the crowd. Some could be heard responding with "Bless the Lord."

Lincoln finished his six-minute address with these thoughts.

"With malice toward none; with charity for all;

- with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right,

- let us strive on to finish the work we are in;
- to bind up the nation's wounds;
- to care for him who shall have borne the battle,
- and for his widow, and his orphan
- to do all which may achieve and cherish
- a just, and a lasting peace,
- among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Lincoln's spirit of inclusivity, his rare use of the personal pronoun “I,” and his message of reconciliation serve us well today.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer questions.

Sources

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